

Oak Hill Cemetery Chapel
350 feet northeast of gatehouse at
3001 R Street, N.W.
Washington (Georgetown)
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-172

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

OAK HILL CEMETERY CHAPEL

Location: In Oak Hill Cemetery, (Georgetown), Washington, D.C. The cemetery grounds are bound by R Street, N.W., on the south, Montrose Park on the west, and Rock Creek on the north and east. The chapel is about 350' east of the gatehouse and slightly to the north, at about the point where 29th Street intersects R Street.

Present Owner: Oak Hill Cemetery Company

Present Occupant: Not applicable

Present Use: Mortuary Chapel

Statement of Significance: This chapel, designed by James Renwick, is often called a miniature Gothic gem. It is the only example of Renwick's Gothic Revival Church design in the District of Columbia.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1850
2. Architect: James Renwick
3. Original and subsequent owners: The cemetery is located in an area known as "The Rock of Dumbarton" which adjoined the limits of Georgetown. The following is an incomplete chain of title to the property. The references are to the Recorder of Deeds, Washington, D.C.

1792 Deed June 13, 1792, recorded June 16, 1792 in Liber A folio 117
George Beall, eldest son and heir at law of
Colonel George Beall, deceased, and wife Anna
to

Thomas Beall, his youngest brother

Recites that Colonel George Beall by his last will and testament, dated on or about March 15, 1780, did devise unto his son Thomas Beall, all that part of land called and known by the name of "Rock of Dumbarton," adjoining Georgetown, divided by the first large branch North of Georgetown, then down with said

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branch to Rock Creek, then down the west side
by and with said Creek, and all that part
that layeth to the South of the before men-
tioned branch and the West side of Rock Creek....
Contains about 50 acres.

This property of Thomas Beall was transferred to his
daughter, Eliza R. Washington, wife of George C. Washington.

1848 Deed June 7, 1848, recorded June 10, 1848 in
Liber W. B. 142 folio 274
Lewis W. Washington
George C. Washington, et al
to
William W. Corcoran

Part of a tract of land called "The Rock of
Dumbarton" beginning at a large stone on the
north side of Road Street planted by Thomas
Beall of Georgetown and Richard Parrott as the
corner of the line dividing their lots and is
now the corner of the same line between the
lots of said Lewis Washington and George C.
Washington, and Captain W. M. Boyce, and running
by and with the North side of said Street, East-
erly 482' to a large stone being the corner of
the land of the heirs of Lewis Grant Davidson
from the premises hereby intended to be con-
veyed, thence North 12 degrees, East 412' 9"
to a spring branch, thence North 40 degrees,
East 198' to Rock Creek, thence West by and with
said Creek 700' to a large rock marked B. W.,
being the northern corner of the land owned by
Captain Wm. M. Boyce and premises hereby intended
to be conveyed, thence with a straight line 1030'
to beginning. Containing 12 1/2 acres more or
less.

1848 Oak Hill Cemetery Company chartered by Congress,
March 3, 1848

1849 Deed of Gift May 1, 1849, recorded May 19, 1849 in
Liber JAS 4 folio 29
William W. Corocran
to
Oak Hill Cemetery Company

At later dates additional parcels of land were purchased
including land from "Evermay." At the present time, Oak
Hill Cemetery consists of 15-3/4 acres.

4. Original plans and construction: None known.

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5. Alterations and additions: The only changes made in the chapel have been necessary maintenance repairs, and the addition of electric lights and a heating system.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

1. For information on the Cemetery and its founder, W.W. Corcoran, see HABS No. DC-249.

2. James Renwick:

James Renwick, the architect of the chapel, was born in New York City November 1, 1818. His father was an engineer and professor of engineering at Columbia University. Renwick himself graduated from Columbia in 1836 and joined the engineering staff of the Erie Railroad Company.

In 1843 he won the competition for the design of Grace Church at the corner of Broadway and 10th Street, New York City. The cornerstone for the building was laid October 31, 1843, and the building was finished, except for the stone spire, March 7, 1846. At the time Renwick won the competition, he was not yet twenty-five years old, and he had had no formal training in architecture. Yet he designed the most fashionable church in New York City, and his reputation was established thereby.

Church design comprised the majority of Renwick's early works, the most famous being St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City. He was selected as architect of St. Patrick's in 1853, but the cornerstone of the cathedral was not laid until 1858. The completion of the building was to take twenty years.

In 1846, Renwick was appointed architect of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The building he designed in 12th-century Norman style was seriously damaged by fire in 1865, and when reconditioned was made fireproof. The plan and the exterior still follow Renwick's design. This building is one of the most important examples of American Gothic Revival. Renwick also designed the original Corcoran Gallery in Washington, which the Smithsonian Institution is now in the process of restoring as the Renwick Gallery.

Most of Renwick's work was done in the New York City area. He designed the Free Academy, the parent of the City College of New York, and three hotels--the Clarendon, the Albemarle, and the St. Denis. He also designed a new facade for the New York Stock Exchange (no longer extant) and many large estates, cottages, and villas. Renwick did many buildings for the city of New York, including several hospitals. Most of these buildings were based on Gothic or Romanesque models.

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He later turned to non-Gothic forms in his designs for such buildings as Vassar College and the Corcoran Gallery. The latter is based on French Renaissance style.

Renwick's practice grew so large that he took in a partner in the 1870's and formed Renwick and Sands. After Sands' death, he took in his nephew and his wife's cousin, to form Renwick, Aspinall and Renwick. William Root and Bertram Goodhue were trained in Renwick's office.

Renwick died on June 23, 1895.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views: None found.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and Unpublished Sources:

District of Columbia Deed Books, Recorder of Deeds,
Washington, D.C.

b. Secondary and Published Sources:

Dictionary of American Biography. Vol. XV. New York:
Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935, pp. 507-509.

National Cyclopedia of American Biography. Vol. XI.
New York: James T. White & Company, 1909, p. 102.

The Smithsonian Institution. Smithsonian Institution
and American Heritage Magazine, 1965.

Prepared by Ellen J. Schwartz
Architectural Historian
The Commission of Fine Arts
September 1969

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This beautiful little Gothic chapel, designed by James Renwick in 1850, sits on the highest ridge of Oak Hill Cemetery. Renwick's skillful use of contrasting sandstone and gneiss, as well as the fine proportions of the structure, make this diminutive chapel one of the most pleasing religious buildings in Georgetown.

2. Condition of fabric: The chapel is in excellent condition both inside and out. The painted mullions of the windows of the east and south sides are flaking in a few places. The floor is recent.

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B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This rectangular structure measures 23'-2" north-south by 41'-2", with the buttresses (2' deep) adding 4 feet to each dimension. The sides have four bays, the facade one. The chapel is one story high.
2. Foundations: Stone to grade. There is a red sandstone water table 1-2' from grade, depending on slope.
3. Wall construction: Walls are constructed of Potomac gneiss, a dark gray, fine-grained igneous rock with a high mica content, and a greenish or yellowish cast to some of the blocks. It is laid in random courses, generally 4- $\frac{1}{2}$ " or 9" high. A cornerstone block in the northwest corner buttress (not shown on measured drawing of the north elevation, sheet 4) bears the date 1850. Red sandstone is also used extensively--for the water table, five-sided belt course (about 5" thick) which runs below the windows, the window enframement, buttress caps (two double sets), frieze and cornice, decorative bell cote at the west gable end, and the elaborate Gothic finial at the east gable end. The west doorway and sill are also sandstone.
4. Framing: Load-bearing walls with wooden joist floor and wooden roof and trusses.
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: The front door is framed by a heavy two-step molding with floral drops but no columns. The inner columns, with base and caps, are about 6 feet tall.
6. Chimneys: There is a modern metal furnace flue behind a buttress near the northeast corner.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: There is a large two-leaf pointed door on the west elevation, with four lancet panels in each leaf. The door is painted brown, and is protected by a wrought-iron gate with strap decoration (below) and leaf patterns (above). The padlock for this iron gate is inscribed on the reverse in Spencerian script: "Presented/Oak Hill Cemetery Co./By/James L. Norris/ March 19, 1895."

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- b. Windows and shutters: Above the entrance door is a rose window with wood mullions and frame, with twelve quatrefoils around the perimeter. At the north and south sides of the chapel the lancet windows are in a sandstone enframing and have wood frames and mullions. Each window, in a masonry opening 47" wide, is composed of two lancets with a quatrefoil in the apex. On the rear (east) elevation is a large lancet 8'-10" wide, also with wood mullions, painted brown.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The east-west gable is covered with square gray slate set at 45°.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The cornice and eaves are of sandstone, with a rain gutter hidden behind the cornice; there are three downspouts per side.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: A decorative bell cote (with no bell) is located at the west end of the gable. It is of sandstone, and appears to be about 1' deep. At the east end of the gable is an elaborate Gothic finial, which appears to be missing its apex.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: The interior is a rectangular space measuring 19'-10" x 37'-8".
- 2. Stairways: None.
- 3. Flooring: The present floor, of 2" hardwood, appears quite new.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are paneled with a dark wood wainscoting to a height of 50". The lower portion of this is decorated with a trefoil lancet 25" tall; above each lancet is a sexfoil 6" across. This dado zone extends to the lower edge of the window splay; but below the east window (which is higher), the dado is 14" taller than at the north and south sides. Walls above the paneling are plaster, painted light yellow.

The ceiling is one of the most decorative features of the interior. It is divided into four north-south bays by the roof trusses (whose lower edges form a pointed arch). The slope of the roof in each bay is divided into six squares, plus two half squares formed at the top next to the ridge,

and at the bottom next to the plate. The squares formed (by the rafters and purlins) are filled by a large quatrefoil with chamfered edges, through which one can see the vertical boarding of the roof. On this boarding is mounted a gilded four-pointed floral applique at the center of the open quatrefoil (or half-quatrefoil at the top and bottom). The trusses which form the four bays have pierced floral leaf drops at the spring. Three of the trusses are free standing, and the two at the east and west ends are apparently attached to the end walls. The apex of each truss is composed of an open sexfoil in the center with open dagger tracery at each side. All of this ceiling construction is of two contrasting hues of dark wood.

5. Doorways and doors: The interior of the two-leaf four-panel main door is identical to the exterior, and is also painted brown. On the interior the pointed door opening is framed with a single hood mold with Gothic leaf drops at the lower ends, all apparently of plaster (now painted dark brown.)
6. Decorative features and trim: Next to the ceiling, the windows are the most striking feature. The interior masonry opening is 44" wide, with a double lancet in a heavy wood frame and mullions, painted brown. In the apex is a fleur-de-lis quatrefoil pane. The lancets are of light colored glass, with a pink to violet outer border, blue inner border, and light cream or yellow glass for the central panels. The fleur-de-lis and other features are yellowish. Two windows on each side have lower panels that pivot open. The large east window is predominately light green, with a large central panel depicting a winged angel holding a wreath of victory in each hand. Above him are a cross, and a crown with palm branch; in the apex of the window are the alpha and omega, with four crowns. All windows have hood molds with drops similar to the doorway. The west rose window lets in very little light, due to the heavy mullions.

There are several commemorative plaques on the walls. On the east wall, to the south of the window is a marble plaque which reads: "In honor/of/Stephen Bloomer Balch D. D./Born/ on 'Deer Creek,' near Ball, Md./April A.D. 1747./Came to Georgetown D.C./March 16th A.D. 1780/Died September 22nd A.D. 1833./He planted the Gospel in/Georgetown, Founded 'The Bridge Street Presbyterian/Church'/and was for more than 50 years/its pastor./In life he practiced what he preached/No eulogy can add to such/a record." There are also three bronze plaques (1961) on the south wall, and one on the north. The pews, altar table and lectern are recent; the two heavy wood chairs of Gothic design on each side of the altar are old, however.

7. Notable hardware: There are six embossed metal handles (which fold flush) and two undecorated ones for four trap doors in the floor (presumably for access to the heating system). Other pulls, for smaller trap doors, are modern brass. The lock plates on the front door are also decorated, but the hinges are plain.
8. Lighting: There are two cast metal six-branch gas chandeliers in the chapel, which have now been converted to electricity and painted a dull gold.
9. Heating: There are six small hot air grates in the floor; the furnace is directly under the floor.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Oak Hill Chapel sits on the ridge of the highest portion of the cemetery, about 75 feet north of R Street at the junction with 29th Street. The chapel entrance faces west.
2. Enclosures: None.
3. Outbuildings: None.
4. Walks: In front of the chapel is a concrete paved area about 24' x 48'. West of this is a curved brick drive.
5. Landscaping: West of the chapel is a large oak tree, and north and south of the concrete area, clumps of boxwood.

Prepared by Daniel D. Reiff
Architectural Historian
Commission of Fine Arts
September 1969

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were made in 1969 during a project to record 14 structures and a group of 16 items of "street furniture" in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. The project was conducted by the Commission of Fine Arts with the cooperation of the Historic American Buildings Survey. The resulting documentation was donated to HABS by the Commission and published in 1970 in HABS Selections Number 10, Georgetown Architecture: Northwest Washington, District of Columbia.

The project was under the direction of Mr. Charles H. Atherton, Executive Secretary and Administrative Officer of the Commission of Fine Arts. The recording team was composed of Miss Ellen J. Schwartz

and Mr. Daniel D. Reiff, Architectural Historians, and Mr. William P. Thompson, Architect. The photographs were made by photographers J. Alexander and Jack E. Boucher under contract to the Commission.

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The measured drawings of the Oak Hill Cemetery Chapel were delineated by Michael A. Fields in 1967 to fill a course-study requirement at the School of Design, North Carolina State College, and were donated to HABS by the College. Mr. M. Hamilton Morton, Jr., AIA, was commissioned by HABS in 1970 to make the drawings of the Georgetown Custom House and Post Office.